

## BACKGROUND

### Profile of Health Sciences Librarians<sup>5,6,7</sup>

- ▼ There are 7,000-10,000 professional health sciences librarians in more than 3,600 medical libraries and other health-related corporations and consortia in the U.S. and Canada.
- ▼ 37% work in cities with populations over 5,000.
- ▼ Fewer than 5% are employed in towns with under 10,000 persons.
- ▼ 46% work in hospital libraries.
- ▼ 25% work in academic health sciences centers.
- ▼ Over 80% are female.
- ▼ Less than 10% are from minority groups.
- ▼ 21% received their bachelor's degree in English or journalism, 19% in social sciences, 15% in biomedical or biological sciences, and 14% in education.
- ▼ 87% have a master's degree in library and information science or another field, and 4% hold a Ph.D.
- ▼ Approximately 60% of MLA members attend a continuing education (CE) course sponsored by an organization other than MLA, 38% attend an MLA Chapter-sponsored CE course, 19% attend an MLA Annual Meeting course, and 12% participate in MLA's Journal Club or self-study program.



**H**ealth sciences librarians play a vital role in making medical knowledge accessible to health professionals. The Panel believes that their role can and should be sharply enhanced as today's rapidly changing health care environment increases the demand for more effective management of information, be it in the form of patient education materials, clinical practice guidelines, decision support systems, or computer-based patient records.<sup>8</sup>

To achieve this goal will require fundamental changes in the ways that health sciences librarians are recruited, educated, and trained throughout their careers. There is a special need to increase the diversity of the profession to reflect the population as a whole. Many pressing public health problems such as the AIDS epidemic disproportionately affect minority communities.<sup>9</sup> Outreach to these communities is an important part of health sciences librarianship today.

The 1987 NLM Long Range Plan<sup>10</sup> promoted the development of a cadre of highly trained health sciences librarians to adapt new technologies to the needs of the biomedical community. It recommended that NLM help "institute new prototype programs containing special curricula in U.S. library and information science schools that emphasize integrated information concepts and the application of new technologies to information dissemination." Also envisioned was the need for continuing education opportunities to upgrade the skills of librarians currently in the workforce who must learn to use these technologies, and who are also increasingly called upon to impart these fundamental skills to health professional end-users in a variety of educational and clinical settings.

Recent advances in the technology of high performance computing and communications have dramatically accelerated the need for educational change.<sup>11</sup>

Biomedical scientists and health practitioners are becoming increasingly dependent on computer-based tools for the conduct of research and the transfer of results to patient care. Information technology has at once become the means for advancing the pace of scientific discovery, in fields such as molecular biology,<sup>12</sup> and the means by which health care delivery in the academic medical center, the local community hospital, and the rural clinic can keep pace with rapid advances in the laboratory.<sup>13, 14</sup>

Health sciences librarians are prepared to build upon their traditionally high level of skill in information management and service, and to support the biomedical community's continually expanding need for information systems integration in research, education and patient care.<sup>15</sup>

The challenge is to devise mechanisms that can provide the education and training needed. In 1991, the Medical Library Association (MLA) educational policy statement, *Platform for Change*,<sup>16</sup> defined the professional attributes and technical capabilities required of the health sciences librarian of the future. Among its recommendations, the report specifically requests NLM to identify future directions and priorities for its activities in support of the educational needs of health sciences librarians. Convening the Planning Panel on the Education and Training of Health Sciences Librarians, therefore, was a direct response to both the NLM 1987 Long Range Plan and the MLA request.

In June 1993, NLM convened a Steering Committee<sup>17</sup> to develop a framework for the panel. The Steering Committee assisted in defining the major issues that the full panel should discuss, likely future directions for health sciences librarianship that should be considered, desirable outcomes, membership and consultants for the panel, and additional background information that the panel would require.

Drawing on the Steering Committee's work, then Board of Regents Chair, Rachael Anderson, appointed the panel in the summer of 1993 and gave the following charge:

Analyze the possible programs and activities of the NLM, of individuals, of professional associations, and of other institutions that might be undertaken over the next ten years in order to assure that:

- ▼ Society benefits from the skills of health sciences librarians; and
- ▼ Persons who choose health sciences librarianship will be properly educated and trained, and that they have opportunity to engage in the most important work concerning information and health care.

The panel met three times during 1993-1994 to weigh these issues. In addition to the deliberations of the "core" panel

members, five "ad hoc" panels of experts were invited to speak on specific relevant topics: issues of employers of health sciences librarians, schools of library and information science, future changes in health care delivery, hospital libraries, and medical informatics.<sup>18</sup>

The "core" panel then formed working groups who produced informal reports in these and related areas.

The panel emphasized the need for creative thinking to develop strategies to address the challenges outlined in this report. One such strategy recommended herein is the NLM Challenge Award, detailed in chapter 5. The purpose of this award is to bring together interested organizations and institutions to develop implementations of specific high priority report recommendations.

Achievement of all of the goals of the following report is essential if health sciences librarians are to remain indispensable members of the health field and continue to provide high levels of service to the public health. To do so will require cooperation and collaboration amongst the various stakeholders—individual librarians, professional associations, health professionals, schools and universities, government agencies, and prospective employers.